

## SAF V Survey Report

### Reunion Adjustment among Army Civilian Spouses with Returned Soldiers

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#### Background

Army families are experiencing heightened exposure to reunions after extended Soldier deployments, most recently because of our nation's Global War on Terror (GWOT). These reunions are usually welcomed and happy occasions but they can also be accompanied by stress and readjustments, for all members of the family. During separations, families reorganize their lives to accommodate the absence of their deployed members. Reunions require families to adapt once again to pre-deployment conditions but also to new realities that have emerged for the Soldier and the family. To assist in these adjustments, the Army provides an environment, as well as services, that are designed to promote positive adjustments and strengthen family well-being during this reunion period. These supports help meet the objective of the Army Well-Being Strategic Plan that promotes Soldier readiness and helps to attain a positive sense of well-being for all members of the Soldier's family. It is recognized that these periods of separation and reunion are potentially stressful for families and that this stress can impact the readiness of the Soldier and his/her unit. Thus, it is in the best interests of the Army to promote positive separation and reunion adjustments among spouses and children.

#### Key Findings

- ❖ Over one-half (55%) of Army families who have recently experienced deployment were separated for 12 or more months.
- ❖ About half (53%) rated their reunion adjustment as easy.
- ❖ The most difficult adjustments came from changes in soldiers' moods, restoring co-parenting, and learning to communicate again.
- ❖ Successful adjustment is highly related to the quality of the marriage before and after reunion.
- ❖ Support for families from unit leaders and support programs during deployment and reunion is rated as weak to poor.

#### Key Actions

- ❖ Increase unit and installation leader support for families during deployments and reunions.
- ❖ Promote opportunities for married couples to strengthen their relationships.
- ❖ Assist spouses in building and sustaining friendships with each other during deployments.
- ❖ Strengthen deployment and reunion support services to Army families.
- ❖ Improve strategies of Army agencies to strengthen families and promote resilience.

The objective of this report is to provide an analysis of how well Army civilian spouses adjust during reunions after deployments and how well the assistance provided to these families is supporting these adjustments. The level of family adjustment to reunion is examined from the perspective of how well Army families take advantage of the personal, social and organizational assets they can use to help them adapt to the stresses of reunions.

#### Data Source

The U.S. Army Community and Family Support Center (CFSC), in conjunction with the U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences (ARI), has conducted Surveys of Army Families (SAFs) every 4 years or so to examine areas important to Army families. The most recent survey (SAF V) was conducted between September 2004 and January 2005. A previous survey (SAF IV) was conducted in April through July of 2001. This survey is one

way to assess the effectiveness of the Army's Well-being Initiative.

Key questions related to the reunion experience after deployment and separation were included in SAF V. Reunion questions were specifically included in the questionnaire sent to the spouses of Soldiers who had been deployed to a theater of operation but had returned in the past 12 months. Data from this survey were difficult to compare to earlier surveys because of the unique nature of current deployment patterns. Since the survey is conducted from a sample of Army spouses, any interpretation of the findings should take into account the sampling error (SE). For this report the following SEs apply: overall sample = +/- 1%; officer spouses = +/- 2%; enlisted spouses = +/- 2%.

## Key Findings

The findings in this analysis are provided in three sections: (1) Deployment and Reunion Experience; (2) Reunion Adjustments and (3) Support for Reunions after Deployments

### *Deployment and Reunion Experience*

In the 36 months prior to the current SAF V, one in five Army spouses (19%) experienced the deployment of their Soldier spouse to a theater of operation, followed by a period of reunion<sup>1</sup>. These spouses are the focus of this analysis. About half of the spouses in the survey (55%) experienced their reunion more than 6 months ago and for 38% of spouses, this reunion occurred in the past 4 to 6 months (7% had their reunion in the past 3 months or less). Over half of spouses (55%) reported being separated for 12 or more months in the past 36 months, including 12% that that were separated for 18 months or longer (see Table 1). Long periods of continuous separation also occurred, with 38% being separated at one time for 12 months or longer (not on the Table). The following are key findings from this analysis:

- ★ Families of enlisted personnel experienced more months of deployment before their current reunion than officers
- ★ Families of senior enlisted personnel were the most likely (18%) to have been deployed for half or more of the past 36 months
- ★ Family exposure to separations is similar in CONUS and OCONUS
- ★ Female spouses experienced longer separations from their military partner compared to male spouses

Table 1: Months Deployed for Military Operations before Reunion in Past 36 Months (% Reporting)				
	Less than 6 Months	6 to 11 Months	12 to 17 Months	18 to 36 Months
Officer	13	40	39	8
O1-O3	14	39	41	7
O4-O6	13	43	35	9
Enlisted	9	35	43	12
E1-E4	12	41	42	5
E5-E6	8	32	45	15
E7-E9	8	32	42	18
Warrant Officer	9	32	40	19
CONUS	9	36	43	12
OCONUS	12	35	43	10
Female	9	36	43	12
Male	21	29	38	13
Overall	10	36	43	12

### *Reunion Adjustments*

Adjustments to reunion involve a great deal of mutual understanding and flexibility. Each of the spouses was asked whether they considered their adjustment to be easy or difficult overall, as well as within specific areas in their personal or family life that may have required specific

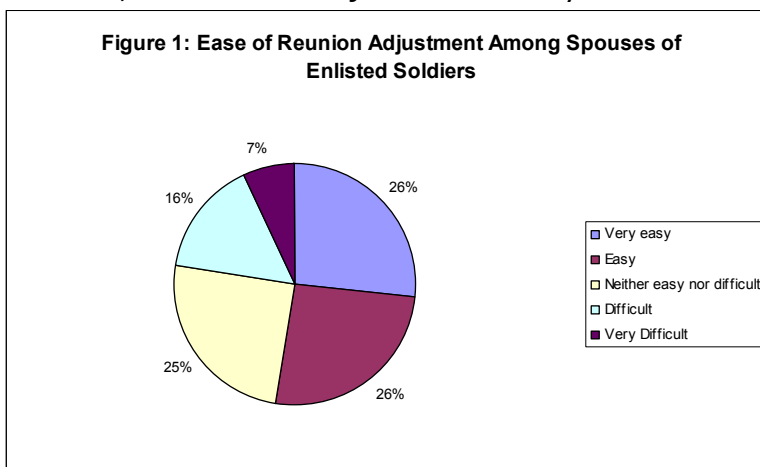
<sup>1</sup> See data on Table 1 of Deployment and Separation Adjustment report by Orthner & Rose, 2005.

adjustment strategies. On the overall adjustment question, 53% of spouses rated their reunion adjustment as easy or very easy (See Table 2). In contrast, 22% of spouses rated their adjustment as difficult or very difficult. Another 25% of spouses considered this adjustment neither easy nor difficult. In other words, about 47% did not consider the adjustment easy. The spouses most likely to consider their reunion adjustment *difficult* included:

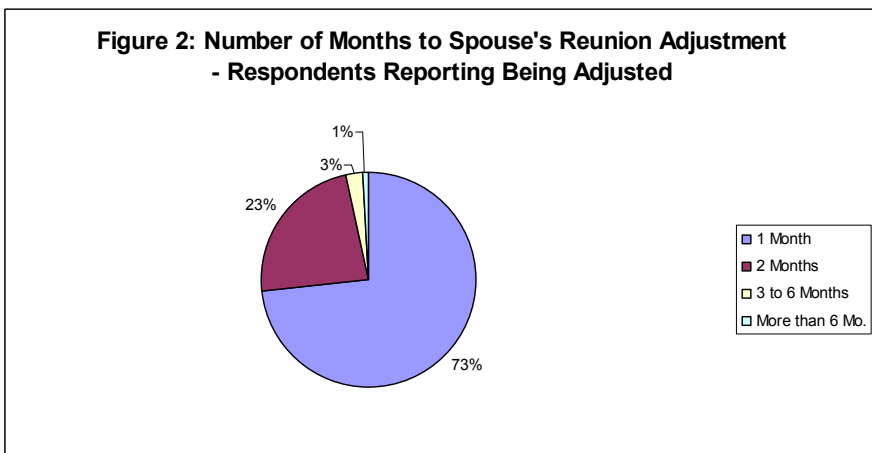
- ★ Enlisted spouses (23%) compared to officers' (16%)
- ★ OCONUS spouses (25%) compared to CONUS (21%) SE?
- ★ Male spouses (35%) compared to female spouses (22%)

A more detailed analysis of reunion adjustment among enlisted spouses is found on Figure 1. Here we note that about one in four of these spouses (26%) rated their reunion adjustment as "very easy" and another one-fourth (26%) as "easy". In contrast, 7% saw their adjustment as "very difficult" and another 16% as difficult.

At the time of the survey, 88% of the spouses considered themselves to have made a successful adjustment to their reunion. This included 96% of the spouses of officers and 87% of the spouses of enlisted Soldiers. Among those spouses who considered themselves now adjusted (See Figure 2), the majority (73%) indicated that this adjustment occurred in the first month after reunion. Only 4% considered this adjustment to take at least 3 or more months.



There are some dimensions of personal and family reunion adjustment that appear to be easier to make than others (See Table 3). Overall, however, only about half of spouses rated specific areas of adjustment to be easy. On the positive side, "marital intimacy" was reported to be easy for both enlisted (61%) and officer (69%) spouses. But on another key area of marital adjustment, "communicating with one another," fewer spouses rated that as easy (47% of enlisted and 59% of officer spouses). Other findings from this analysis include:



- ★ Enlisted spouses consistently rated these critical areas of adjustment VAGUE more difficult than officer spouses
- ★ Adjustment to the Soldier's personality and moods was the most difficult transition for spouses,

especially among enlisted families

- ★ Learning to once again be co-parents was difficult for about one-third of families, especially reestablishing parenting roles and learning once again how to share in discipline

- ★ For employed spouses, adjustments related to their PAID work were somewhat easy MAKE A LITTLE MORE CONCRETE after the Soldier returned

- ★ Getting back to the routines of the family and making household decisions after being apart were stressful for about one in four families.

**Table 3: Ease of Spouse Adjustment to Routine after Reunion**

	% Easy		% Difficult	
	Enlisted	Officer	Enlisted	Officer
Adjusting to household routines	42	50	26	20
Working at your paid job	55	60	15	14
Making household decisions	46	56	23	15
Reestablishing household/parenting roles	39	47	36	27
Disciplining/handling children	37	43	38	28
Meeting expectations of children	43	50	24	20
Marital intimacy	61	69	21	14
Communicating with one another	47	59	33	21
Changes to member's personality/moods	29	43	45	29
Handling family finances	49	67	23	10

One strategy that the Army has encouraged in order to promote separation and reunion adjustment has been communication during the deployment. This can occur through periodic phone calls, email, instant messaging, letters, notices from the rear detachments or even video teleconferences. Spouses were asked if these communication methods were used in their family and if so, if it was frequent or infrequent. This was then examined according to the ease or difficulty of the reunion experience (See Table 4). Not surprisingly, ease of reunion was more likely among those who had frequent communication using these methods. The greatest benefits appear to come from telephone and video teleconferencing. Other findings include:

**Table 4: Percent Reporting Easy Reunion Adjustment By Type and Frequency of Communication**

		Officer	Enlisted	Overall
By Phone	Frequent	80	74	75
	Infrequent	79	64	66
By E-mail	Frequent	79	71	72
	Infrequent	81	67	68
By Instant Messaging	Frequent	83	72	73
	Infrequent	76	65	66
By Letters	Frequent	82	73	74
	Infrequent	78	66	68
By Rear Detachment	Frequent	81	71	74
	Infrequent	77	67	68
By Video Teleconference	Frequent	*	74	75
	Infrequent	78	67	68

\*Less than 20 respondents.

- ★ The benefits of more frequent communication are greater for enlisted families than officer families
- ★ Regular contacts via email do not appear to have substantial adjustment benefits (4% more families report easy reunions)
- ★ Frequent use of telephone contacts increased the percentage of families with easy adjustments by 9%
- ★ Frequent use of video teleconferencing increased the percentage of families with easy adjustments by 7%
- ★ Overall, the gains in reunion adjustment using these technologies, however, are relatively small with infrequent users still reporting comparatively high levels of adjustment

### ***Support for Reunion Adjustments after Deployment***

The Army also provides direct assistance that is designed to ease family adjustments after extended deployments. These are provided by the Soldier's unit or by Army agencies and organizations that help the family and the Soldier make this transition. Army spouses experiencing a separation and reunion were asked if they used any of this assistance and if they found this helpful or not. The results of this analysis are found on Table 5. Overall, fewer than half of spouses took advantage of this assistance; officer spouses were the most likely to do so. Among spouses who used the help, only about half felt it was helpful. Again, officer spouses were slightly more likely to rate the assistance as helpful. Other key findings include:

<b>Table 5: Use and Helpfulness of Reunion Assistance</b>				
	% Used		% Helpful	
	Enlisted	Officer	Enlisted	Officer
Training/preparing spouse for reunion with member	39	50	49	56
Additional help provided by FRGs	45	53	47	56
Teaching strategies for coping with reunion issues	39	49	48	54
Providing support/assistance for spouse and family	32	35	47	55
Training/preparing children for member's return	25	25	47	51

- ★ More spouses received help from FRGs (45% of enlisted and 53% of officer spouses) than any other source reviewed but FRGs were not viewed as more helpful than other sources
- ★ Only one in four (25%) of spouses received help for the reunion experiences of their children
- ★ Specific classes or instruction on preparing for reunion were used by 39% of enlisted and half (49-50%) of officers
- ★ The satisfaction rates with these services suggest that significant improvements are needed to attract more spouses to these forms of support

Another way to assess the underlying factors that are associated with reunion adjustments is to examine the organizational, social, and personal assets that people can actually use to help them cope with the demands and transitions associated with reunions after extended deployments. These assets are attributes of the person or their environment that can provide resources during times of stress and challenge. They can consist of personal and family strengths, or practical sources of help from formal or informal systems of support that promote well-being. The approach used here assumes that people who take advantage of assets that are available to them will find it easier to adjust successfully during reunions. This analysis of assets can also help Army leaders identify specific strategies for improving reunion adjustments by targeting resources toward those assets that return the greatest benefit to Army families.

The analysis of assets and deployment adjustment among spouses who are experiencing, or have recently experienced, a deployment is provided on Table 6. Comparisons are made between those who rated their reunion adjustment as very easy or easy with those who considered their reunion adjustment to be difficult or very difficult. The data clearly indicate that the spouses and families who adjust well after a duty-related separation, in this case a deployment to a theater of operation are more likely to have these assets operating in their lives. The difference score column offers a quick summary of how much difference in adjustment can be attributed to each of the assets listed in the Table.

The findings from this analysis of assets and reunion adjustment indicate:

- ★ The greatest difference scores between those who had an easy or difficult reunion adjustment resulted from having a strong marriage before (20% improvement) and after the deployment (37% improvement)

- ★ The next greatest difference scores result from satisfaction with unit and installation concern for families. Overall, these satisfaction scores are somewhat low (ranging from 29% to 41% satisfied among those who rated their reunion adjustment as easy) but these ratings are much higher than those with difficult reunion adjustments (19% to 27% satisfied).

<b>Table 6: Presence of Personal and Social Assets and Ease of Reunion Adjustment (% Reporting Asset)</b>			
	<b>Easy</b>	<b>Difficult</b>	<b>Difference (Easy-Difficult)</b>
<b>Army-Related Assets</b>			
Comfortable dealing with Army agencies	64	53	11
Comfortable with Army medical system while spouse away	79	71	8
Know where to get emergency assistance	85	78	7
(Keep self) well informed about Army	77	69	8
Soldier keeps spouse well informed about Army	87	70	17
Experience with military	57	51	6
Satisfied with respect Army shows spouses	37	21	15
<b>Personal Assets</b>			
Does regular volunteer work	70	54	15
At least some college education	64	66	-2
<b>Financial Assets</b>			
Employed full/part time	43	49	-7
Satisfied with spouse's pay and allowances	45	31	15
Satisfied with security and stability of spouse's job	80	71	10
<b>Social Assets</b>			
Participation in AFTB	81	79	2
Participated in FRG in last 12 months	68	65	3
Have person outside home to talk to	59	47	13
Willing to turn to neighbor, friend or family member for help	64	58	6
Willing to turn to religious leader for help with a problem	51	45	6
Increased attendance at church or synagogue during deployment	47	50	-4
<b>Leadership Assets</b>			
Satisfied with concern of spouse's unit for families	35	20	15
Satisfied with high post leaders' concern for family	29	19	10
Satisfied with unit officers' concern for family	36	22	14
Satisfied with unit NCOs' concern for family	41	27	14
<b>Family Assets</b>			
Satisfied with marriage before spouse deployed	89	69	20
Satisfied with marriage at present time	90	53	37
Communicated often by telephone during most recent deployment	26	18	7

- ★ Perceptions of Army support also are helpful in promoting reunion adjustments, especially when this is enabled by the Soldier keeping the spouse informed (+17%), when the spouse is satisfied that the Army respects spouses (+15%) and when Army agencies are considered comfortable places to go (+11%).
- ★ Among spouses experiencing a recent deployment, 37% of those who rated their reunion as easy consider the Army supportive of spouses. Among those with difficult reunions, satisfaction with Army respect for families is 21%.
- ★ The only area of social support with a substantial contribution to reunion adjustment is having a person that is always available to talk to outside the home (+13%). Still, this is not a common pattern, with 59% of those with easy adjustments having such a relationship compared to 47% with difficult adjustments.

## **Conclusions**

The findings in this report indicate that the majority of Army spouses are able to adjust to their reunions in an acceptable manner. These are adaptable and resilient families who rebound rather quickly to extended separations. This general sense of adjustment, however, contains underlying tensions related to family reorganization, co-parenting, family responsibilities and communication patterns that take more time to restore. Much of this restoration falls within the domain of the relationship process itself and having a strong marriage and family relationship is the single biggest predictor of how well and how long that reunion adjustment will take. Army assistance with the deployment and reunion process can be helpful but at this time, this assistance is not rated very highly by spouses. Similarly, unit support for families can be helpful in the reunion process but this support is not considered to be very strong. It is clear from these data that significant gains in reunion adjustment can be fostered but more attention must be given to strengthening family, unit and service systems support if these gains are to be realized.